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ABSTRACT

Despite the existence of a college-wide Committee on Access, Equity, and Cultural Diversity and other efforts, minority retention rates at Illinois' Parkland College remained disproportionately low. In 1996, the college received a grant through the Higher Education Cooperation Act to develop an approach to recruit and retain minority students. Instead of blaming minority students for failing to persist and continuing to use ethnocentric approaches, the project seeks to provide a cohesive, holistic approach to minority student articulation by assisting schools and colleges in creating inclusive educational communities for minority students. The focus is on evaluating, assessing, and transforming the total educational environment. In addition, to respond proactively to the barriers that affect minority students and to attempt to facilitate change in the educational environment, the project consists of the following four interconnected phases: (1) describing and prioritizing characteristics of inclusive educational communities for minority students; (2) designing assessment models for measuring characteristics of these inclusive educational communities; (3) developing strategies for comprehensive institutional plans for inclusiveness in the total educational environment; and (4) providing development opportunities to achieve the full involvement of faculty and staff in the development of curricula and pedagogies appropriate to gender-balanced, multicultural education. (TGI)

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New Statewide Regional Initiative on Creating Inclusive Educational Communities for Minority Students

By

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association of Community Colleges (76th, Atlanta, GA, April 13-16, 1996).

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"New Statewide/Regional Initiative on Creating Inclusive Educational Communities for Minority Students"

Dr. Zelema Harris
President, Parkland College

AACC Annual Convention
April 14, 1996
Atlanta, Georgia

In 1991, I called for the creation of a college-wide Committee on Access, Equity, and Cultural Diversity. As Yvonne's (Yvonne Singley of the Illinois Community College Board) data illustrate, not only were the demographics of our schools and communities changing, it was clear that the needs of these diverse students were not being adequately addressed.

The Committee on Access, Equity, and Cultural Diversity soon established a strong presence, not only at Parkland, but with businesses and organizations throughout our college district and with schools, colleges, and universities throughout Illinois.

In 1993, the Committee hosted the first statewide conference on gender-balanced, multicultural education. More than 500 educators from secondary schools and community colleges came to hear such scholars as Professor James Banks and the late Dr. Myra Sadker and her husband, Dr. David Sadker.

Because of its leadership in creating inclusive educational communities, Parkland received a Ford Foundation grant to conduct a summer institute for 30 Illinois community college faculty on curricular reform.

Parkland also already had a strong Office of Women's Programs and Services, which

provided a variety of services and guidance to women of all ages. Its programs and workshops attracted not only Parkland students, but women throughout our community.

A third component in place at Parkland was our grant-funded Minority Transfer Center. While the Center's services are free to all students, we target students of color to take advantage of the Center. We wanted to provide as many resources as possible to encourage minority students not only to succeed at Parkland, but to continue their education by transferring to a four-year institution. In FY95, 1,363 students were served by the Minority Transfer Center. However, we recognized that the Center was only a small effort in assisting minority students to achieve.

Another important factor was the Illinois Prairie Higher Education Consortium. Parkland is one of eight colleges and universities in East-Central Illinois that originally linked resources when funding for telecommunications became available.

All of these pieces, the Committee on Access, Equity, and Cultural Diversity; the Office of Women's Programs and Services; the Minority Transfer Center; and the Prairie Consortium were in place at the time I attended a meeting along with about 13 other college presidents at which I discussed minority students in higher education. I stated that not enough was being done to recruit and retain minority students.

The Director of the Board of Higher Education responded to my remarks with a challenge. He said go back and work with our Consortium on developing an approach that would help recruit and retain minority students. If we could do that, funding might be available through the Higher Education Cooperation Act (HECA).

When I returned to Parkland, I involved our dean of continuing education, Sandra Boileau, who is Parkland's consortium representative, and Pauline Kayes, who was director of Women's

Programs and chair of the Committee on Access, Equity, and Cultural Diversity.

Sandra and Pauline really took it from there. They put together a conceptual model outlining the main components for addressing the needs of minority students in higher education.

Equally important was their analysis of trend data of how IBHE/HECA funding had been granted. It became clear that up to that point, few community colleges had taken the lead in getting HECA funding. Leadership had always fallen to four-year institutions.

With community colleges being the first, and often the only, choice for many minority students, it seemed important for Parkland to take the lead in obtaining this grant. Plus, we had already established ourselves as a leader in cultural diversity education and creating inclusive educational climates.

Our Consortium liaison, Sandra Boileau, presented the model for the grant proposal to the Consortium, where it was unanimously and enthusiastically supported.

Pauline and I then met with the executive director of the Illinois Community College Board and Yvonne Singley, who not only supported the model, but became a partner in the program development phase.

With input from our Consortium members and the approval of their institutions, the proposal was finalized (all presidents signed off on the proposal).

Yvonne and I also met with an IBHE staff member who was responsible for HECA grants to review the proposal's goals and implementation strategies.

The grant was funded for FY96 and Parkland was named the grant administrator, a rarity for community colleges when it comes to this type of funding.

While it's too soon to know the outcomes of the grant on minority student recruitment and

retention, I can tell you that this initiative already is a model of cooperation and collaboration among two-year and four-year higher education institutions and state governing bodies.

Now Pauline Kayes will tell you more about the specifics of the grant.

From "New Statewide Regional Initiative on Creating Inclusive Educational Communities for Minority Students"

AACC presentation, Atlanta, Georgia, April 14, 1996

Pauline Kayes
Director of the Center for Multicultural Education
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As educators, our traditional solutions to the problems of minority students have mainly focused on either keeping them in high school until they graduate or in increasing their access to higher education. In the state of Illinois alone, for example, we spend millions to prevent minority students from dropping out and allocate almost 80 million dollars a year to recruit minority students into our colleges and universities. As you know, most of these state-funded special programs are designed either to motivate students of color to complete high school and to pursue higher education or to ease their transition from secondary schools to college, so ultimately the overall numbers of minority students attending and graduating from college will increase.

Unfortunately, what occurs too often for minority students in our schools and colleges is illustrated by state statistics that indicate disproportionately low graduation rates and disproportionately low retention rates. Furthermore, a majority of minority students who do complete end up in low-paying, low-stability jobs like child care worker, food service worker, and social service worker.

So what is happening in our schools and colleges that sabotages, undermines, discourages, and derails the success and achievement of our minority students? Instead of asking questions like this that hold the school or college itself accountable, we usually watch minority students

move into and out of our educational institutions (some make it; most do not) and become stuck in the favorite paradigm for improving the chances of our students of color: if we inculcate them in the characteristics and behaviors that lead to academic success, they will succeed.

This paradigm, however, often results in blaming minority students for their own failure. In current educational jargon, we blame our minority students as being culturally-deprived, as being educationally deficient, as being at-risk, as being learning-disabled, and as being socially maladaptive. This popular theory that there is something wrong with minority students and not our institutions prevents us from focusing on how the institutional and classroom climate of a school or college can foster or discourage the learning and achievement of minority students.

It also prevents us from understanding why our efforts on behalf of minority students are not working as well as our best intentions. First, our efforts are piecemeal -- that is, we make efforts here and there to improve advising or counseling or support or orientation -- to respond to the needs of minority students, but these piecemeal efforts are often disconnected from one another, and, as a result, they do not adequately address the more complex and deeply-rooted problem of creating an inclusive and pluralistic educational culture across the whole school or college.

Our efforts are also not working because we invest most of that $80 million a year in **special programs** that are often forced to survive, barely, on the fringes of the school or college and, as a result, are powerless to transform the school or college as a whole. And sadly enough, many schools and colleges feel that their obligations to students of color are fulfilled by such special programs so they do not need to do more.

Our efforts are not working because one of the main assumptions underlying all of our

special programs is that what minority students need to succeed is help in adjusting, adapting, and assimilating to the dominant campus culture, which is often alien from their own cultures and communities. This assumption of **mainstreaming** puts the responsibility of change squarely on the shoulders of our minority students and leaves our schools and colleges unaccountable and unchanged.

Finally, our efforts are not working because, in spite of all the special programs and allocated resources for minority student achievement, our schools or colleges, our classrooms, are still extremely **ethnocentric** -- since our approaches to teaching, counseling, planning, learning, success, and achievement are based on theories derived from research on middle-class and upper-class, predominantly Eurocentric, male student populations. In the last twenty year, research and experience are proving that these ethnocentric approaches to teaching and learning are ineffective for both our culturally diverse and female students.

Our goal, then, in the HECA-sponsored project is to provide a cohesive, holistic approach to minority student articulation by assisting schools and colleges in creating inclusive educational communities for minority students.

Our focus is on evaluating, assessing, and transforming the total educational environment of our schools and colleges. According to James Banks, renowned multiculturalist at the University of Washington, the total school or educational environment is a social system -- with norms, values, expectations, structures, and statuses -- like other social systems. In order to create inclusive educational communities for minority students, we must understand how our schools and colleges serve as social systems for our students of color and women students. Any of these eleven areas may be the focus of initial school reform, but comprehensive analysis and

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change must occur, not just in the curriculum or student activities or counseling, but in all areas so that the school or college can create and sustain a multicultural, gender-balanced, inclusive educational community.

In closely examining the total educational environment, we find that barriers to minority students are still pervasively insidious throughout our schools and colleges because, in spite of all the special programs and money spent, there has been no fundamental change in the dominant campus culture that students of color must negotiate every minute of every day of every academic year. So, often the choice for minority students is a no-win situation: either assimilate and risk losing cultural identity or resist assimilation and risk failure. No wonder so many of our students of color partially or totally disengage from our classrooms and our institutions.

More importantly, there has been no real, thorough examination of the ethnocentric structures in and outside the classroom. Until we can perceive these ethnocentric structures and systems from the perspective of our minority students, we will not understand how and why our schools and colleges "trip up" the learning and achievement of our culturally diverse students. Since most of us teaching and administering today are white, Anglo, and Eurocentric educators, we will need to be educated in how to perceive our classrooms and our schools and colleges from the experiences and cultures of our minority students.

To respond proactively to these barriers and to attempt effecting real change in our schools and colleges, our HECA-funded project consists of four interconnected phases:

First, describe and prioritize characteristics of inclusive educational communities for minority students. We need to start here because most of us have never thought about what exactly comprises inclusivity for minority students in and out of the classroom.

Next, design assessment models for measuring characteristics of inclusive educational communities for minority students. The more feedback or input we receive from our students of color through student surveys, focus groups, and personal interviews, the more we will know how our schools and colleges "measure up" in creating an inclusive, multicultural climate, and the more we will know about what our students of color need and want in order to succeed in our institutions.

The third phase is to develop strategies for comprehensive institutional plans for inclusiveness in the total educational environment. Most schools and college, and even state educational boards, articulate their "good intentions" for minority students in mission statements, resolutions, goals and objectives, and strategic plans. However, most do not have actual plans for converting these intentions into actions, advocacy, and resources. Without comprehensive institutional plans that address the total educational environment, real change will not occur in our institutions for minority students and they will still cling to the periphery of our schools and colleges along with the special programs designed to support them.

Finally, faculty and staff development is essential in order to implement all of these phases in an individual college or school. Too often, initiatives for minority students are relegated to one person in student support services and do not involve faculty and staff across the entire institution. Once again, we will not be able to create and sustain inclusive educational communities for minority students without the full involvement of faculty and staff -- through faculty development in the curricula and pedagogies of gender-balanced, multicultural education and through cultural diversity education for staff.

In its first year, the project will have involved and worked with over 500 administrators,

faculty, and staff from six community colleges, three public universities, one private college, and K-12 schools. We are looking forward to expanding the project further in the next two years.